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I would have written a shorter letter,
but I did not have the time.

Blaise Pascal

TOWARDS A GENERIC ANALYSIS OF THE MICROBLOG (BASED ON A STUDY OF TWITTER)

Abstract

This article is an attempt to determine the place of microblogs, posted on Twitter, on the Internet or, more broadly in the multimedia genealogy.

First, the service itself is presented and mechanisms of its functioning are described. Then its importance for society is mentioned. Furthermore, some crucial issues related to the theory of genres are presented and they constitute an essential introduction to the research methodology. The “guides” on the path of reflection and on the characteristics of microblogs are the “older siblings” of this form of expression: the Internet, journalistic and other genres, whose determinants have already been described. Such an order is matched against another one – the tradition of genres’ description in four aspects: structural, pragmatic, cognitive and stylistic.

Key words: microblog, new genres, multimedia genealogy, theory of genres, Twitter

Introduction

The goal of this article is to establish a preliminary definition of the place of microblogs, published on the Twitter website, in the Internet – or more broadly, multimedia – genealogy. It will be accompanied by reflection on

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genealogy itself, since—making this goal an especially interesting research challenge—the current state of research on the genres of all linguistic texts does not give any ready answers to the questions concerning them that are asked by linguists and literary critics, as well as by media studies scholars and scholars of culture in general. The analysis presented below is not a synthesis of long-term studies on the issues connected with Internet communication and its genealogy, but an “exploratory” record of contact with them. Thus it is also not motivated by the idea of presenting a definitive solution, but of showing the points that give rise to further questions. Such an approach allows one to look at a relatively new¹ phenomenon with the curiosity of an “explorer”.

First of all the service itself and the way it works will be presented, and next its meaning in society. After as brief a presentation as possible of Twitter, I will go on to the core issues tied to the theory of genres, which are an essential introduction to the study’s methodology. As “guides” on the path of reflection about the genealogical description of microblogs I have chosen the “older siblings” of this form of expression: Internet genres, press genres and other speech genres whose characteristics have already been described. This line of thought intersects with another – the tradition of generic description based on four aspects: structural, pragmatic, cognitive and stylistic (Witosz 2001: 84; Wojtak 2004: 16). Thanks to this manner of presenting the issues, the summary will be a straightforward (but not necessarily easy) drawing of conclusions on the subject of the generic indicators of the studied communications observed in the four aspects mentioned above.

What is Twitter?

“Welcome to Twitter. Find out what’s happening, right now, with the people and organizations you care about.”² Three fundamental aspects of Twitter’s operation can be gleaned from this greeting which initiates contact with the recipient: it is a source of information about *people*, it is a source of information about *organizations* and, finally, a source of infor-

¹ Twitter was founded in 2006, other sites offering microblogging services appeared mainly in the wake of its popularity (<http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikroblog> Accessed: 23.08.2012).

² <http://twitter.com/> Accessed: 23.08.2012. All quotations found in the text maintain the original spelling and punctuation.

mation concerning them “*right now.*” Twitter thus calls itself an “information network.”³ The information transmitted through the service takes the form of messages, able to contain links, whose total length cannot exceed 140 characters. These messages are called *tweets*. A user of the service can be a recipient only, can also send out messages, and can combine these functions at will at any desired frequency. The user can see the tweets sent by any given person or organization, provided that they are not restricted. He can do this in an orderly manner, choosing feeds which he will “follow”: “Build your timeline. Follow people to get their Tweets.”⁴ A “timeline” is a list of tweets published by profiles followed by a given user, ordered from newest to oldest (such ordering is also used when viewing individual profiles)



Fig. 1. Twitter: Example “timeline”

³ <http://twitter.com/about> Accessed: 23.08.2012.

⁴ <https://twitter.com/#!/welcome/recommendations> Accessed: 23.08.2012.



Fig. 2. Twitter: Example user profile (summary)

Twitter is a social network: by making lists of “following” and “followers” groups of Internet users are built; use of it is free, and requires only registering and then logging in.

The limit on the length of messages allows tweets to be counted among microblogs. Wikipedia⁵ defines a microblog as:

(...) a kind of Internet diary in which the main bearers of information are short entries that usually are one sentence long. Like conventional blogs, a microblog can also contain pictures, audio clips or films; it can be available to all or to a narrow group selected of readers chosen by the author. The idea behind microblogs is the transmission of information on actions happening at a given moment, small thoughts or plans which are to be carried out in the near future. It is also possible for conversations to take place between users through the use of entries.⁶

The remaining traits of the service will be described in the parts of the article dealing with the issues connected with them.

⁵ The *Słownik terminologii medialnej* [Dictionary of Media Terminology] (2006) does not contain an entry for the word “microblog”.

⁶ <http://pl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mikroblog> Accessed: 23.08.2012.

Why Twitter?

In order to answer this question, I mention several responses taken from the media:

Social media are already not only popular, but also opinion-shapers. Here they beat out television and magazines. These are the results of the latest (from June) report of the Instytut Monitorowania Mediów [Media Monitoring Institute]. It finds that in a ranking of the ten most often cited medias one finds both Facebook and Twitter, and in fifth and sixth place at that.⁷

“Mariusz Błaszczak’s entry from two years ago is the hit of the weekend on Polish Twitter”⁸. “Radosław Sikorski has again caused an uproar on Twitter. This time the Polish diplomatic head’s update describing the Warsaw Uprising as a ‘national catastrophe’ provoked a reaction from opposition members of the Warsaw city council.”⁹ “This tragic death [of a teenage boy who purchased a bag of Skittles moments before his death – K.S.], however, became a pretext for a discussion of racially-motivated violence and prompted heated protests. The actor and director Spike Lee, known for his activism against racism, sent out a call on Twitter for people to send bags of Skittles to the Stanford chief of police. Thus the candies became a symbol of a protest across the entire nation.”¹⁰

“The reaction to Wojewódzki and Figurski’s critiques had just begun to fade when the next, although this time short-lived, wave of outrage was provoked by the Euro-MP Marek Migalski, who published an update on Twitter comparing the athletic (and black!) tennis player Serena Williams to [Polish MP Anna] Grodzka. What was Migalski counting on? Provoking a scandal, of course. And as noisy a one as possible, as that.”¹¹

Tweets of a racist nature sent out after England lost in the quarterfinals of the Euro 2012 Football Championship provoked a response from the

⁷ <http://www.rp.pl/artykul/10,921585-Facebook-i-Twitter-w-pierwszej-dziesiatce.html> Accessed: 24.08.2012.

⁸ http://wyborcza.pl/1,75478,12296224,Wpis_Mariusza_Blaszczaka_sprzed_dwoch_lat_weekendowym.html Accessed: 24.08.2012.

⁹ <http://polska.newsweek.pl/sikorski-zhanbil-pamiec-powstania-radni-pis-przed-1-sierpnia,80291,1,1.html> Accessed: 24.08.2012.

¹⁰ http://wyborcza.biz/biznes/1,100896,11447920,Wyslij_Skittles_policji_ktora_kryje_zabojce.html Accessed: 24.08.2012.

¹¹ <http://spoleczenstwo.newsweek.pl/miedzy-slowami--chamstwo-iii-rp,94030,1,1.html> Accessed: 24.08.2012.

police, as was noted on television by the BBC immediately following the match.¹²

The above collection is not the result of exhaustive research, but instead was gathered somewhat “in passing”; one could cite a significantly larger number of anecdotes about Twitter. When observing the place of Twitter in the media system, one can recognize that Twitter is not only worthy of attention, including from the linguistic point of view, but quite simply cannot be ignored. It appears that Twitter is not only a place for commenting on reality – it can also shape it.

The statements cited above show that, as a place for the exchange of information, Twitter not only influences the world of the media (for example by giving rise to political scandals), but can also play a large role in the creation of social views or in the operations of candy companies. While not a subject for linguistic analysis, the significance of the creation of Twitter on the functioning of the Internet should be noted as well. As one programmer and expert on the service states, “Twitter has revolutionized five different areas of the web: communication in real-time, mobile access to the Internet, ‘non-reciprocal’ social networks, short form communication, the use of APIs.”¹³

Twitter is thus not mere “tweeting”, but an influential media outlet. Thus the question of its genealogical status is non-trivial.

Why genre?

Given the general human tendency towards organizing, sorting, cataloging, and even at times pigeonholing, the concept of genre seems very useful. It allows one to place different types of works in their network of mutual relations. Assigning a genre is also a visible sign of recognition for a given phenomenon, and what has been recognized has been, to a certain degree, mastered, or at least domesticated. This gives one a feeling of control, and, furthermore, of safety as well.

Verbal formulations are also subject to categorization. When a certain human creation (not necessarily an artistic one) falls outside of man’s ability to define it in terms of genealogy, this means that man has lost power over the products of his own hands and mind. Such a situation can be

¹² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-18582171> Accessed: 24.08.2012.

¹³ <http://www.orianmarx.com/2012/07/12/what-twitter-wants/> Accessed: 24.08.2012. Translated into Polish by K.S; English article citation based on original site.

extremely dangerous to the human race, as has been explored in numerous works of science fiction. Leaving groups of verbal utterances uncategorized will not drive mankind into extinction, but does, however, cause a certain discomfort. Hope for regaining academic comfort can be found in the view of Bakhtin, who stated that there are no texts which do not make use of "concrete, relatively long-lasting and typical forms of constructing the whole" (1986: 373) and thus are not genres of speech. Accepting this assumption requires, in the opinion of B. Witosz, developing an "appropriately elastic conception of genre," that is to say, one from which we do not expect a "finite catalog of necessary and sufficient traits" (2001: 70).

The problem for genealogy is that it enters into a higher level of complexity, however, when we take into consideration texts found on the Internet, which, due to its discursive character, is at times seen as "genealogically amorphous" (Kawka 2010: 67). One exit from this line of thought, which threatens to exclude the Internet from genealogical consideration, is to adopt a static research perspective (Wojtak 2004: 16), while of course maintaining full awareness of the fact that the described texts belong to a wider discourse. Texts found on the Internet are characterized by an enormous diversity resulting from their essential characteristics (see: Grzenia 2006), from the hypertextuality of communications that make use of it.¹⁴ Due to this diversity, as well as the enormous size of the production and the shockingly quick evolution of texts on the Internet, their classification is made more difficult. These phenomena, in the opinion of A. Gumkowska in her analysis of blogs, are a factor "which inclines some researchers to a definitive rejection of theory about their generic status" (2009: 241). In turn M. Kawka, also in a description of blogs, ascribes the cause of the lack of a delineated, canonical generic model to this their very "Internet-ness": changeability, hybridity, multicodality, etc. (2010: 67). The literature on genres indicates a potential solution to the problems involved with placing Internet texts in a genealogically sorted world. First of all, the above-mentioned elastic definition of genre would have to be drawn up. Helping to meet this need is a theory which discusses the identification of genres on the basis of prototypes (Witosz 2001: 74 et seq.), which also creates space for the discursive character of the Internet, indicating the relativity involved in determining genre and the dynamic nature of categorization itself as a result of the "(inter)subjective selection of criteria". Fully in agreement with this is the view that the "author" of a hypertext is the "receiver" surfing the web (Wilk 2000: 39 et seq.) and that genre

¹⁴ The indicators of hypertextuality are discussed by U. Żydek-Bednarczuk (2003: 8).

is recognized by navigating in the scope of the global text (Żydek-Bednarczuk 2004: 432). Second, while the specific nature of Internet texts make it impossible to a significant extent that the indication of their mutual and permanent structural traits, generic indicators can be sought in the “communicative message” of texts which are united by genre while lacking canonical variants of a model (Wojtak 2010: 14). Thirdly, it is clear that “the majority of texts simultaneously enact the traits of several models” (Witosz 2001: 80. Cp. Żydek-Bednarczuk 2004: 432), it seems fitting to steer research towards secondary and complex genres whose models have an alternative or adaptive character.

Many researchers, however, do not agree with this last proposition to a greater or lesser degree (eg. Kawka 201, Gumkowska 2009: 232¹⁵), raising among others the argument that the specific nature of the Internet means that there is no way to relate texts found on the Web to man’s traditional verbal activities, for example:

(...) the attempt to find in blogs the *remnants* of other known genres, and thanks to this a simple redefinition of their affiliation, is from the methodological point of the view doomed to failure from the outset, since this type of networked writing was born in completely different communicative circumstances, fills different needs of both sender and recipient, and above all is not a sum, selection or compilation of other traditional genres. (Kawka 2010: 62)

And here again the classic conception of the problem of genre proposed by Bakhtin comes to the rescue in resolving the problem of “un-generic” texts. When defining genres, he pointed out the fact that “[they – K.S.] take shape depending on their function (...) and the special, innate to each domain, circumstances of linguistic intercourse” (1986: 354). In my understanding the Internet is a separate sphere of linguistic intercourse. Its circumstances are different from those of face-to-face communication and mediated communication via other media, but remaining unchanged is the fact that man is the user of the Internet and along with the appearance of new transmission media he began to apply known methods of “linguistic intercourse” to the new possibilities and limitations.

We learn that speech genres, by gathering up communicative competencies, are the legacy of all generations (Balcerzan 2000:89); it is thus impossible to hold that the Internet created new genres or rather new utterances outside of any genealogical belonging. New genres are the effect of the eternal evolution of communication, requiring only modernized

¹⁵ More on this subject in the research methodology section.

and/or new tools which allow them to be recognized and described. For obvious reasons, these tools only arise in response to the growth of the genres themselves, and so, due to the fact that Internet genres are forming at a rapid pace, researchers are repeatedly forced to pause in their excitement and decide if, when and in what way to change the manner of their analysis. They are thus not always able to keep up with the production of tools, and perhaps one should not expect them to be.¹⁶

In summary: one can state that the Internet is a domain in which texts escape generic categorization. It is, however, too vast a forum for the exchange of human thought to allow research to be content with only pointing out the difficulties in the creation of an Internet genealogy. With the present state of knowledge of Internet communication, still after all in its early stages, even those researchers who try to point out its un-genericity are helpless, to a certain degree and at least in regards to traditional terminology, and willing or not are describing *genres*.

Can a new Internet *genre* be described? (Analysis methodology)

The goal of this work is to outline a preliminary answer to the question of whether a microblog is a new, distinct genre or else if it is a variant of an already-described and established by tradition genre (or genres). The method that seems the most simple for answering this is the comparison of the microblog with other genres operating both on the Internet and outside of it.

Adopting a comparative perspective might be controversial to some. Voices were raised against this method in the context of the study of blogs. A. Gumkowska cites the views of D. Boyd, according to whom the description of blogs as “Internet journals”, that is, using a known term that makes reference to a genre already entrenched in society, is the use of a metaphor – “exploratory schematics” – with whose help “researchers build stiff frameworks that force the acceptance of a determined point of view and limit the ability for sensible analysis” (op. cit: Gumkowska 2009: 242). While calling blogs Internet journals does indeed seem a bit too narrow of a conception, nevertheless the use of exploratory schematics can be fully justified by the novelty of the genres, with the key being to

¹⁶ More on this subject in the research methodology section.

go beyond these frameworks on the path to expanding the new genres. The described practice is presented by D. Boyd as a treatment helping new “readers unfamiliar with Internet realities” “to come to terms with the new form and the new technical possibilities” (op. cit: Gumkowska 2009: 241). Here one must ask about the role of the users (including those who read only) of the Internet in the formation of genres.¹⁷ I cite one other opinion, which was raised as a side note to the critique of comparative methods in genealogical research on blogs by M. Kawka: “Many times it happens that remnants, traces of traditional genres can be found in blogs, but this results only from the writing habits and customs of the blogger or their lack of ability in this field” (2010: 64). One can make the conclusion from this that the idea of the blog is an innate, natural one, which the users of the Internet should, in fact must, come to terms with. It is not clear to me in what way, in the opinion of D. Boyd, researchers, who themselves are necessarily always a step behind the participants of communication about which they write, are supposed to help “untrained” users of the Internet in coming to terms with it, and on what basis M. Kawka assesses the competence of bloggers. A genre is, after all, and in terms of multimedia, a changeable communication perhaps above all else, “a collection of conventions which guide the members of a certain community as to what shape to give certain interactions” (Wojtak 2004: 16), and their crystallization is a process that unfolds over time. Which communication strategies become conventional for a given genre is decided by the “configuration of goals or cultural conventions” (Balcerzan 2000: 91). Accepting such a supposition, one can be freed from an overly authoritarian judgment of Internet users’ competence, leaving their evaluation to the specifics of that kind of communication, since “within the realm of non-aesthetic communication, failure to respect the rules of the genre is interpreted as the result of insufficient communicative competence, which interferes with interaction” (Witosz 2001: 82). Therefore the participants in the communication themselves reject those transmissions which do not meet their expectations, those regarding genre included.

One can thus state that texts created on the Internet have a form resulting from the generic models previously mastered by their creators, and only on the terrain of this new medium are they subject to often far-reaching transformations, adapted to the goals of participants in communication acts which are achievable thanks to the particular qualities of this medium.

¹⁷ Taking blogs into consideration is very essential in an attempt to analyze microblogs. They are both concerned with an approach to a new phenomena.

New users develop their Internet fluency by absorbing its rules in a manner close to that of the process of becoming acquainted with traditional speech genres, and moreover the democratic and anonymous nature of Internet communication allows for the introduction of innovations to a significantly greater degree than in other "spheres of linguistic intercourse."

In the dispute over the legitimacy of using the comparative method in research on new media genres, one can place on the other side of the barricades those researchers who see such a method as the result of the "complicated nature" of the texts and the condition of modern "genealogical awareness" (Krzempek 2006: 369), those who are convinced that "research on concrete linguistic interactions must (...) place emphasis on uncovering their *genealogical complexity* (...)", but cannot be content with only this (Witosz 2001: 80), and also those who consider the secondary character of new genres in relation to traditional ones to be axiomatic.¹⁸

In light of the above-mentioned arguments, in my opinion, adopting the comparative method in research on the generic indicators of the microblog is justified. This analysis will be conducted, in accordance with the earlier justification, from a static perspective in terms of four aspects: structural, pragmatic, cognitive and stylistic (Wojtak 2004:16, cp. Witosz 2001: 84), with greatest significance being ascribed to pragmatic indicators (cp. Żydek-Bednarczuk 2004: 434). After all, they constitute the "life context" of the genre, "that is the model circumstances of use and institutional ties" (Dobrzyńska 1992: 79). Her observation allows insight into the way in which mediation via the Internet influences particular communicative acts. In addition, as B. Witosz holds, "the transformations which come into play in the framework of genres transported from another context to new surroundings" are, next to "the transformations taking place as a result of the mutual interaction of the constitutive genres" and the discovery of the secondary character of genres, the phenomena which "must be emphasized (...) by research on concrete linguistic interactions" (2001: 80). The figures from the field of pragmatic communications – sender and receiver – determine the essence of the genre according to the respective "creation models" and "horizons of expectations" they adopt (T. Todorov, via Wojtak 2004: 17)¹⁹ Likewise, coming at it from the other side – that of the subject of research – concentrating

¹⁸ "Already a preliminary examination of the Web allows one to see that it makes full use of traditional genres" Woźniak 2010: 55.

¹⁹ The communicative functions of the genealogy of literary works are discussed by K. Bartoszyński (2000: 15).

on the pragmatic aspect of generic models seems to be the optimal route, since, as A. Gumkowska observed, changes in the nature of communication brought by the Internet “concern above all the structure of transmissions and the *arrangement of sender-receiver roles* [emphasis – K.S.]” (2009: 231).

Therefore the similarity to other genres, resulting from the secondary genealogical nature and differences between genres, which are the result of the “Internet” character of microblogs, mainly in terms of the life context of the genre and relations between sender and receiver, will be the backbone of the analyses conducted of texts published on Twitter.

Twitter or tweet? (The subject of research and research materials)

One more controversy must be added to those that come up in connection with the genericity of Internet texts: what should be considered to be the “text” that is said to represent one genre or another. In light of the hypertextuality of the Internet, which, for example, makes the final shape of a communication dependent on the user-receiver, the question of the subject of research can quickly reach the limits of the recognizable, since there are as many hypertexts as there are individual states of web users’ activity. Thus yet again we must, in order to say anything at all about linguistic communications found on the Internet, or in this case on Twitter, choose artificially separated, “laboratory” selections of hypertexts. While bearing in mind their fragmentary nature and the context in which they operate, they allow for the drawing of conclusions in regards to the greater whole. While these will not be the real networks of connections between these fragments, as the researcher does not have access to these, they will be potential hypertexts, or even more importantly, information about the *possibilities* latent in this kind of communication. The decision still remains, however, as to what to take as the fundamental unit – the subject of research.

In the case of the Twitter, the options are numerous. The first option, which I have already rejected to a certain extent, was to consider examining Twitter as a whole. It requires a few additional remarks, however, mainly in light of the interesting proposal by M. Wilkowski (2009):

If we begin to analyze the various forms of content publication on the Internet, we will see that perhaps what matters is not genres as publication tools (blogs, wikis, homepages, microblogs) but genres as the form of

contents (literary genres, the form of a literary work, characterized by its own construction and style). A great variety of genres can be made available on a blog within the framework of one publication infrastructure. On a blog one can publish an academic article with footnotes, a story, a poem, a film or an audio recording. A wiki page can contain not only an Internet encyclopedia (possessing a defined, permanent form of entries) but also, for example, free-form notes connected with hyperlinks or a collection of biographical information. On Twitter, one can use 140 characters to publish dry information, biting commentary or a haiku. One can even ask the question: does the Internet appropriate literary genre?

Perhaps in discussions on blogs and microblogs instead of the concept of *genre* it would be better to use the term cultural interface, as proposed by Lev Manovich based on HCI (...) it is impossible not to agree with the above remarks. As in other forms of mediated communication, on the Internet and beyond (text messages, blogs), one can see their dual mode of function – they are interdependent channels and also communications transmitted by means of these channels (Wolańska 20012: 22; Gumkowska 2009: 240). Concentrating only on the content, as M. Wilkowski suggests, while allowing one to avoid ill-fitting generic characterizations and attempts at separating hybrid forms, can however lead us to throw out the baby with the bathwater by depriving our description of a perspective that would seem to be purely formal, but also has a significant influence on the pragmatic contours of microblogs. The attention paid in this proposal to the role of the interface in the description of Internet genres is, however, important. J. Grzenia has already discussed this. He remarks that technical conditions literally create the textual framework that places boundaries on hypertext, to which otherwise delimitation would seem to be foreign. In addition, that framework demarcates the length of the text (quite clearly in the case of Twitter) and also decides on the hierarchy of verbal and non-verbal elements (Grzenia 2006: 151).

The next possible way of designating a research subject would be to single out texts by one author. Such a solution would place central emphasis on the individual characteristics of certain texts as “marked” by the idiolect of certain senders, bringing the analysis of generic indicators closer to stylistic analysis. While this should also be considered in the genealogical characterization of text (Witosz 2001: 81), choosing the category of author as the criterion for designating the subject of research can lead to an incomplete analysis. First, the perspective of the sender is the furthest from the real functional form of Internet texts, which places the main burden of communication on the recipient. Second, the tweets of a single

author can display either a great deal of formal and functional variation or exactly the opposite – complete homogeneity; and furthermore the individual traits of units understood as a stream of entries by one author can to a large degree make the synthesis of knowledge on the subject of genre impossible. After all, each author's entries can be brought into dialog by himself or by other users.²⁰ Considering these replies as part of the context automatically brings texts by other authors into the field of analysis.

The third eventuality that takes into consideration the possibility of interacting within Twitter is the adoption of the "profile perspective" – recognizing the entries visible under a given profile as the subject of research, and thus in doing so considering alongside the entries of one author citation-tweets and reply-tweets. This solution, like the previous ones, can significantly hinder the indication of commonalities, and in addition unduly complicate the process of analysis. Establishing boundaries on which links to follow, even when only considering those within Twitter (links can also lead to any given Internet location), would require making arbitrary decisions each time on the place of their designation.

Given this situation, the most fitting, although certainly not perfect, solution to the problem delimiting the subject of research can be considered to be the analysis of individual tweets. One of the merits of such a solution is the ability to carry out a typology in which a larger role will be played by traits resulting from the nature of Twitter, and a lesser role by the individual influences of specific authors. This will also allow us to analyze individual tweets in the context of the interactions of which they are a part, but of only these interactions – without becoming entangled in broader dependencies (authorship, location on one profile). In addition, in situations where messages placed on Twitter leave the service, the tweet is treated as a relatively autonomous unit, which is also regulated by the rules concerning the citation of Twitter put in place by the service's owners (for example, the rule that tweets be cited in their entirety). Finally, during such a preliminary stage of research the simpler (less complicated) the objects of analysis, the more precise the conclusions drawn.

The research material recorded for this study consists of 300 tweets found on 18 profiles, whose authors are 48 users.²¹ Among them are public and private individuals, governmental and non-governmental institutions, members of the media, both personal and institutional, commercial enterprises and representatives of non-commercial initiatives, promoting, for ex-

²⁰ I return to this in later portions of the study.

²¹ The study also includes some exceptionally chosen examples.

ample, a style of life. The only source of information on each user was the user's profile page. Some of them were marked to indicate their identity had been verified – mainly in the case of profiles for public persons. The recorded material was gathered from April to September of 2012, during which the 10 most recent, sequential tweets by a given author, along with all the tweets by other authors related to it, were recorded, and so the time span of the entries depends on the activity of the individual users, and in some cases (less active users, breaks in activity) spans back as far as July 2011.

Is a microblog a blog?

The fundamental question that arises during the genealogical analysis of tweets is: is a microblog a variant of the genre "blog" or is it also a separate genre? M. Kawka calls the microblog a variety of blog (of the diary, political/journalistic sort), but places it in the same category as audioblogs, videoblogs, and moblogs (blogs written via a mobile phone) (2010: 65), which could mean that the difference between a blog and a microblog is purely a technical one, and in fact the microblog is technologically the closest to the blog of all the above mentioned types. What is more, both blogs and microblogs can contain additional graphical and audio elements, whereas tweets can only contain links to multimedia files.

The subject of links raised above requires historical examination of the interdependencies between blogs and microblogs. At the time of their origin blogs were lists of hyperlinks to other websites (Gumkowska 2009: 233). Twitter, in the opinion of S. Rosenberg, an expert on this issue, took over this area of blog functionality (Wilkowski 2009). Tweets are indeed to a large degree simply links, while they differ from the early blogs in that they also contain commentary, for example:

@grzywaczewski: *Historia jednej z najstynniejszych fotografii stanu wojennego [History of one of the most famous photographs of Martial Law [in 1981 in Poland – trans.]]*: <http://www.polskieradio.pl/101/1564/video/489031> ...

@rozathun: *Pieniadze Nagrody którą w Asconie otrzymał #DonaldTrump poszły w całości do polskich organizacji charytatywnych [Money from the Prize that #DonaldTrump received in Ascona went entirely to Polish charities]* <http://m.onet.pl/kraj/5210212,detal.html> ...

@android_polska: *Podcast* [#27 \[14.08.12\]](http://Android.com.pl) <http://android.com.pl/podcast/4795-podcast-androidcompl-27-140812.html> ...

Such a characterization does not, however, convey the idea of the microblog, since many tweets do not contain any links at all, for example:

@bromancestory: HEJ BYSTRA WOODA BYSTRA WODZICKA, PYTAŁO DZIEWCE O JANICKA XD [YO, FAST CARS, FAST MONEY, ALL DA LADIES WANT MY HONEY XD]

@Ostojanews: Zapraszamy na śródkowe nabożeństwo – temat: „Jak usługiwać mocą chrztu w Duchu Świętym?”. [Come to our Wednesday church service – this week’s topic: “How to use the power of baptism in the Holy Ghost?”]

Before beginning to define the unique elements of tweets, it is worthwhile to indicate the traits held in common by blogs²² and microblogs. Among them are:

- a diary-like character,
- the previously-mentioned multimediality,
- the domination of use function over aesthetics,
- the ability to carry out an analysis of similar types (for example, one can discern: practical advice; information and promotions; editorials; half-public, half-private; personal diaries),
- a hierarchy of presentation beginning from the newest entries,
- a framework imposed by the interface,
- a subject category aiming towards self-presentation.

The fundamental differences, however, can be described in terms of two aspects: structural and pragmatic. In both of these aspects the difference is tied to the length of the text. The limitation of tweets to 140 characters forces adaptation to formal techniques allowing for the condensation of the content, something which also influences their stylistic aspects. In turn, from the point of view of functionality, the short form has as its task to make the communication near-instantaneous; it is meant to occur in real-time; therefore, the discursive power of tweets can differ significantly from that of blogs. The brevity of tweets also has an immediate impact on their mass reception. As confirmation of this hypothesis, consider the previously-mentioned citations speaking of Twitter’s influence on the public life of the societies in which it operates.

Despite their numerous and important similarities, the differences outlined above between Twitter updates and blog entries do not allow the unqualified recognition of the tweet as a variety of blog. The seemingly only difference – regarding the length – incites a process in which the microblog recedes from the peripheries of the blog’s generic field, since

²² I refer here to the article by A. Gumkowska (2009).

its consequences can be seen in all the other aspects of the description of genre. A. Wilkoń has pointed out the interdependency of the length of texts and the style, pragmatic usefulness (which in tweets is tied with the recognizability function) and their expressive function, building a definition of the genre of text (2002: 199). In this he made it clear that it is not a matter of the literal length of the text in terms of the number of words. One can then conclude that if the interdependencies described arise when the span of the text is limited only compared to other genres (for example, short story – novel), then the physical limitation, not even in words, but in characters, is a very strong “genre-forming factor.”

What is the difference between 140 characters and 160 characters? (tweets and text messages)

If we consider the limitation to the length of tweets as one of their most essential generic traits, then the question automatically arises of their similarity to text messages, whose length is limited to 160 characters. A genealogical analysis of text messages has been conducted by E. Wolańska (2002) and M. Krzempek (2006), and the generic indicators of text messages mentioned in these works were used as a point of reference for the description of tweets.

On the structural level, both types of texts are strictly tied to length. In connection with this, they are characterized by a condensation of contents and brevity on all levels – from notation to phrasal syntax and the construction of the message as a whole. The similarities are not, however, exact.²³ First, the length limit in the case of text messages has less significance, since the programs used to write text messages allow one to write longer texts, separating them only on the technical level into fragments 160 characters in length. The consequences for the communication are minor; the sender only has to bear proportionally increased costs. On Twitter messages clearly spread out over more than one tweet occur rarely. There are, it is true, markers, for example “1/2” at the end of the beginning tweet and “2/2” at the beginning of the next, but despite these the sender constructing his message in this way risks their separation by various reply-tweets, and also that his message will begin to function, for example

²³ The analysis of tweets carried out for the purposes of this study did not allow for an unambiguous indication of the differences in the manner of content condensation. This issue will be the subject of further research by myself.

as a citation, only in its fragments. In addition, the later-created fragment will appear higher in the tweet hierarchy, for example:



Fig. 3. Example of a communication spread out over two tweets

In the case of text messages, such disruptions in communication have little chance of occurring.

In stylistic and cognitive terms these two kinds of communication do not differ by much. The greatest divergence in the traits of tweets and text messages can be seen, as in the relation of tweets to blogs, in the pragmatic aspect. First, the category of receiver differs – text messages are for the most part communications directed at an individual and concrete recipient. Mass communications via text message are most often institutionalized. The idea behind Twitter, however, is that of “one-to-all” communication, even if the tweets have the character of a dialogue between two users, which is indicated by joining the tweets into a “conversation” and indicating the addressee beginning with the @ character, for example:



Fig. 4. Twitter: Example conversation

This communication then takes place on two levels: the micro – between specific users – and the macro – in view of all the users of the service. During this, with regards to the fact that in addition to the mass nature of its recipients another constitutive trait of Twitter is the lack of required reciprocity (the non-reciprocity of communication), one can establish that not infrequently the mass communication scale is very important for Twitter's users. It is worthwhile mentioning here that almost the complete democratization of communication is arising in this way. "Almost", since users can hide their profiles from unwanted observers; however, such behavior is not in line with the main idea of the service.

From the mass nature of the recipients come the further traits distinguishing tweets from text messages. The latter above all serve a "practical-life and phatic" function (Krzempek 2006: 367). Tweets usually are not used for practical purposes, and their dominant function could be seen to be expressive, cognitive and phatic. Here again the mass nature of communication via tweets influences the specific understanding of the goal, which is to make and maintain contact, since in a situation where the immediate recipient is not indicated, tweets can be seen as a cry into the void, in hopes of making contact with "anyone at all", for example:

@_catheeee: *wszyscy już śpią?* [everyone asleep already?]
and the subsequent responses:
@jackmalecki: @_catheeee *nie* [no] ;-)
@iKvS: @_catheeee *nieee!* *Panda Smietanka nie spi!* [noooo! Panda Cream is not asleep!] Xd.
@Kasia_Jot: @_catheeee *nie*. [no]
@pryses: @_catheeee *bicz pliz, nie ja* [bitch please I aint sleepin ;)]

The unspecified nature of the addressee is tied to the fact that it is hard to indicate the common life wisdom of communication partners. The sender decides to create tweets concerning only a narrow, often professional topic, or with strong stylistic markings, limiting in this way the circle of potential recipients, for example:

@android_polska: *Doom 3 na Androida? Rozmowa z deweloperem portującym grę [exclusive!]* [Doom 3 for Android? Conversation with developer porting the game] <http://android.com.pl/artykuly/artykuy/4801-doom-3-na-androida-rozmowa-z-deweloperem-portujcym-gr.html> ...

@bromancestory: *nie no. dobry trend* [well no. thats a good trend] XD 1D xD

@EndiPL: @_catheeee *jak ja uwielbiam takie gimbusowe określenia* [oh how I love these kinds of junior-high expressions] -.-'

Text messages that operate as mass communications have a neutral, generalized character due to their institutional senders.

The pragmatic traits of tweets also result in a specific etiquette. Insofar as greeting and parting formulas and terms of address often appear in text messages, despite their limited length, due to the simultaneous nature of communication via tweet (and again: their mass nature), such niceties are very rare. If they do occur, this is usually at the beginning of one's activity on Twitter or after a break in this activity (cp. the previously-cited article on the entry by Mariusz Błaszczak). The function of terms of address, however, is taken over in a large part by the above-mentioned signals for contacting a user or referencing his entry, that is, the name of the user. In their context, these terms of address seem "uneconomical", but they surely bear witness to a respect to the receiver and a transfer of the center of communication difficulty to the scale of the microcontact, eg:

@psington: @rozathun Pani Roza, bardzo ciekawa rozmowa o językach obcych w Trojce – dziękuje [Ms. Roza, that was a very interesting discussion of foreign languages today on Radio 3 – thanks] :)

User names cannot, however, be seen as equivalent to terms of address. This is confirmed by the above example (the seeming doubling of address), and also the situation in which the name of the user serves the function not only of identifying the recipient, but also a vocative function (signalized with punctuation marks), whose fulfillment is not systematically predetermined, for example:

@rozathun: @DziadekWaldemar ?? Czemu tak mówisz? Czy słyszałeś/czytałeś przemówienie PDT kiedy odbierał nagrodę Karola w Akwizgranie? Br polecam! [Why do you say that? Have you heard/read PDT's [Premier Donald Tusk's] speech when he accepted the Charlemagne Prize in Aachen? Highly recommended!]

Text messages and tweets are made similar by traits resulting from limiting their lengths to a concrete number of characters. Their differences in pragmatic terms are, however, important enough that in placing these two types of communication together, one can only speak of a similarity (and not of a kinship) of genres represented by the short forms, which are secondary genres next to the equivalent longer forms – letters and blogs – that have undergone transformation due to the technical demands of the medium by whose means they are transmitted.

What's all the tweeting about? (Tweets in the context of press genres)

The cognitive function, one of the dominate ones, that tweets serve, allows them to be observed through the prism of their “elder relatives” – the factual journalism genres characterized by their short form. These are the news brief, the classified advertisement, and the teaser. For the purposes of the present work I will treat these generic indicators in fairly general terms; I am however well aware that these are forms with their own rich identities (cp. Wojtak 2004; Chomik 2008; Wiśniewska 1998).

One can consider the chief generic traits of the news brief to be the ability to answer the questions: Who? What? Where? in regards to the given fact (*wzmianka* [news brief], *Słownik terminologii medialnej* [Dictionary of Media Terminology]). In the gathered material, one can find tweets on various topics that are indeed similar to news briefs for example:

@Radio_TOK_FM: *Chaos w Warszawie: woda wdarła się na budowę stacji II linii metra* [*Chaos in Warsaw: water has flooded the building site of a station for the second subway line*] <http://dlvr.it/20RGYb>

@AdamWajrak: *Odszedł Wiktor Wołkow, który fotografią malował Podlasie* [*Wiktor Wołkow, who painted Podlasie in photographs, has died*] http://wyborcza.pl/1,96585,5641818,Wiktor_Wolkow___Wiegolud_z_amparatami.html ...

@android_polska: *Czarny Galaxy S III pojawił się na stronie amerykańskiego T-Mobile* [*Black Galaxy S III appears on the US T-Mobile homepage*] <http://android.com.pl/news/sprzet/4812-czarny-galaxy-s-iii-pojawi-si-na-stronie-amerykaskiego-t-mobile.html> ...

Seeing as how links appear in the majority of tweets associated with the news brief, we could skip this step of the comparison and go right to the convention of the teaser as performed in tweets. Yet indicating the traits that link a large group of tweets with the news brief has as its goal shedding light on two phenomena. First, the teaser is a secondary genre, in relation to the news brief among others, which makes it a “genealogical oddity” (Wojtak 2004: 118). A tweet built on the convention of the teaser, enacting in part the generic model of the news brief, is thus secondary by several degrees. Second, one can distinguish two kinds (at least) of tweets referring back to other texts (here texts are understood very broadly, as multimedia communications found on the Internet). Next to the already mentioned tweets-news briefs, one can distinguish a group of

tweets-teasers, which are characterized by a clearly persuasive character, for example:

@grzywaczewski: Mocny tekst: <http://www.tomaszgabis.pl/?p=631> Az sobie wydrukowałem ;) [Powerful text: <http://www.tomaszgabis.pl/?p=631> I even printed it out ;)]

@MarekKaminski: Foto i video relacja cz 1 z Madagaskaru na profilu na Facebooku:) Zapraszamy! [Photo and video report part 1 from Madagascar on my Facebook profile. Check it out!] <https://www.facebook.com/Marek.Kaminski.polarnik> ...

@nowymbank: Słyszeliście zapowiedzi, że w weekend będzie gorąco? To dlatego, że w Katowicach trwa OFF Festiwal. Zapraszamy :-)) [You heard the news that this weekend is going to be off the hook? That's because the OFF festival is going down in Katowice. Come check it out :-)] <http://fb.me/1RoKKBkqr>

M. Wojtak distinguishes a frequently appearing type of adaptation of the teaser's generic model based on the "printing of a news fragment and referring to the whole published within the issue" (2004: 114). Twitter users have adopted this kind of adaptive model from the teaser, bringing it to the creation of tweets which contain a fragment of the target text that fits in 140 characters. These are references to texts found on another social network – Facebook. The unusualness of this kind of communication results from the fact that the text can break off at any given point without affecting its informative value, for example:

@nowymbank: Nie oglądałeś spotkania z Brettem Kingiem na żywo? Możesz nadrobić zaległości – zapraszamy do obejrzenia filmów z... [Didn't watch the meeting with Brett King live? You can catch up – come watch the films from...] <http://fb.me/1jyEXre1Z>

@mwojciechowska: Kochani! Właśnie wylądowałam w USA i od jutra przez kilka kolejnych dni jestem w Centrali National Geographic w... [Dear friends! I just landed in the US and for the next few days starting from tomorrow I will be at the National Geographic Headquarters in ...] <http://fb.me/1IMNKR7s5>

@OnetWiadomosci: PILNE: CBA skierowało do Prokuratury Generalnej zawiadomienie o podejrzeniu popełnienia przestępstwa w jednej z... [BREAKING: the Central Anticorruption Office has passed on to the Prosecutor General information about suspected criminal activity in one of ...] <http://fb.me/20AkoaJHm>

The above examples are evidence of the way in which the transfer of one kind of text to another medium (press – Internet) can influence every aspect of the description of genre:

- structural – enclosed within the imposed form of 140 characters,
- cognitive – decrease in the importance of the completeness of communication,
- stylistic – when communication can be broken off without damage to its communication value (one need only click the link), the short form of the teaser, which determines its style, paradoxically ceases to be a requirement; however, its persuasive qualities (in the press achieved by means of appropriately chosen stylistic methods) are replaced by the effect of *suspense* that is achieved by this very informational incompleteness of the communication,
- pragmatic – thanks to the fact that on the Internet the user can navigate to texts across the web, going from reading an announcement to reading the text to which it refers is significantly easier and quicker, requiring a smaller set of actions. The teaser is simultaneously the “route” – the link.

The contents of tweets can also be identical to the contents of a classified ad, for example:

@Ostojanews: *Nabożeństwo „środowe” odbędzie się we wtorek (6.IX) – godz. 18:30! Gościć będziemy pastora Kamila Hałambca oraz min. dr. Francois Carr’a... [“Wednesday” church services will be held on Tuesday (6.IX) – at 6:30 PM! Our guests will be Pastor Kamil Hałambiec and Minister Dr. Francois Carr...]*

@praca_medycyna: *Zatrudnimy lekarzy specjalistów ZOZ – Głogów [Now hiring specialist doctors at the area health service administration – Głogów] <http://www.pracamedycyna.pl/zatrudnimy-lekarzy-specjalistow-zoz-glogow/> ...*

In the case of this genre, filling the tweet with the contents of a classified ad (in informative, stylistic, structural terms) again results in changes mainly in the pragmatic aspect. Firstly, the availability of small classified ads increases; secondly, again, despite appearances, their contents can be richer thanks to the links placed alongside them.

Already even this abbreviated (in comparison to the expansive issues tied to the generic indicators of teasers, news briefs and classified ads) comparative characterization of tweets allows one to state that the placement on Twitter of texts fulfilling the conventions of the above-mentioned genres is not only an automatic transfer of well-worn forms to a new environment, but in fact this transfer provokes deep changes in the field of the traditional genres.

Is the tweet a genre? (Summary)

The presented analysis does not exhaust the subject of the genealogical characterization of communications found on Twitter. Its development depends on further research on many of its aspects: linguistic, semantic, and a deepened analysis of the pragmatic. Nevertheless the comparative method adopted in this study allows one to mark out the trails which might lead to a definition of the generic indicators of the tweet. In addition, it has shown that, under the influence of the Internet as a new sphere of linguistic intercourse, traditional genres are subject to profound transformations. That is why the work has made use several times of a family metaphor in which certain traits are inherited in a straight line, others appear in later generations or in side branches of the family, and still other appear as a result of kinship – as one can describe the relation between tweets and text messages. On the basis of the observations presented above one can recognize the inherent traits of tweets to be:

- “unfolding” brevity – resulting from the formal boundaries on the one hand, but on the other from the placement of links for the nearly limitless expansion of their possibilities in the realm of fulfilling informative functions;

- multimediality – tweets are characterized by a curious combination of linguistic elements with other (visual, audio) elements – these elements are not given simultaneously, but are available through words, and thanks to verbal communications the user makes the decision to continue on to other elements. (In the treatment of language as a medium, here one should mention that it is not uncommon to find tweets created in various languages within the context of one profile);

- micro- and macrosituatedness of the communications, with a marked domination of macrocommunications;

- dialogic potential;

- characteristic sender-receiver relationship

- broadly conceived intertextuality, one the one hand tied to hypertextuality, on the other enacted as citing tweets from other profiles

M. Wojtak identifies mutual structural traits in genres that develop a canonical version of a model, a common communicative message, yet recognize as a bond alternative variants to the generic model (2010: 14). Tweets seem to contain traits in common with both of these fields – they have a form narrowly defined by the interface, within which the users create

a wide variety of texts, but their diversity has its center within the completed communicative goals. These also immediately result from Twitter's character – the influence of the service, in whose context even the most banal tweet takes on the potential of the whole. Thus despite the great diversity of tweets, concentrating mainly on the structural and pragmatic aspect of the model allows one to sketch out their generic fields. Further research will supplement and verify it.

Translated by Travis Currit

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